

Mental Culture: Classical Social Theory and the Cognitive Science of Religion, edited by Dimitris Xygalatas, William McCorkle. Routledge, 2014. 268pp., pb., \$29.95, ISBN-13: 9781844657421; hb., \$99.95, ISBN-13: 9781844656646.

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Mental Culture is a fascinating collection of contributions edited by Dimitris Xygalatas and William W. McCorkle Jr., which comprises eleven extraordinary face-to-face encounters of several of the most renowned cognitive science of religion (CSR from now on) scholars with some of their most notable predecessors, as well as two interesting epistemological and methodological articles and one comprehensive introduction. The book in itself is a joy to read, with informative and attention-grabbing chapters that allow the reader to perceive the kind of rigorous and interdisciplinary research which the CSR is building on its way to become a fully-fledged scientific discipline.

The presence of two methodo-epistemological chapters, one about the explanatory pluralism provided by Robert N. McCauley and the other written by Luther H. Martin and Illkka Pyysiäinen (which serves as a rational and critical recap), graces the collection by giving it an encouraging, and necessary, self-aware background. The inclusion of these two chapters might not be taken for granted. First of all, they highlight the fact that there is still a strong resistance against CSR: religious studies, for the most part, are still engulfed into a nightmarish maelstrom of cryptotheology and teleology. After one hundred and fifty-five years from the first edition of Charles Darwin's monumental *On the Origin of Species* (1859), after more than half a century from Alan Turing's computational revolution (1950), and after thirty-four years from the groundbreaking cognitive-religious article signed by Stewart Guthrie (1980), an impenetrable fog of concealed misconceptions and patently wrong prejudices still clog the Humanities. Postmodernist theorists and academic promoters of social constructivism and magical antirealism—to quote an incisive formula coined by Italian philosopher Maurizio Ferraris (2014)—have often united their ideological efforts in order to get rid *tout court* of science and evolutionary theory.

From the once solid banks of the religious studies the distant vessels of CSR and evolutionary studies (both biological and cultural) are still seen as an approaching threat (with few exceptions), and the Lèse-majesté crime is always hanging upon those who sympathize with the enemies. As cognitive literary

scholar Jonathan Gottschall recently wrote,

the very idea of bringing science...into Storyland makes many people nervous. Fictions, fantasies, dreams—these are, to the humanistic imagination, a kind of sacred preserve. They are the last bastion of magic. They are the one place where science cannot—should not—penetrate, reducing ancient mysteries to electrochemical storms in the brain or the timeless warfare among selfish genes.

(Gottschall 2013, xv–xvi)

Nevertheless, science might outstandingly help us to realize why we tell that kind of stories and why we will keep on telling them, in order to guide us toward a better understanding of the ways in which “fiction subtly shapes our beliefs, behaviors, ethics—how it powerfully modifies culture and history” (Gottschall 2013, xvii). This is why we sorely need a scientific and evolutionary approach to religious studies (cf. Bulbulia and Slingerland 2012).

The twofold problem at stake here is, on the one hand, the voluntary or naive confusion between “reductionism” and “eliminativism” and, on the other hand, the ultimate clash between one scholar’s not negotiable articles of faith (if any) and the contrary scientific evidences, which risks to produce denial or accommodationism. The first argument is perused in McCauley’s introductory contribution, while the second is mentioned in Martin and Pyysiäinen’s conclusive summary (cf. Wiebe 2008; Martin 2012; Martin and Wiebe 2012). The lack of a unifying (scientific and evolutionary) framework, Martin and Pyysiäinen insist, the oft not specifically defined notion of “mind,” and the theological ambiguities that linger on in the field of religious studies pose a serious risk to the very foundations of the CSR. Therefore, it is a very bold initiative to put in critical brackets (metaphor aside, the aforementioned chapters) a book entirely devoted to CSR as a growing field of scientific inquiry which, for the first time, is collectively caught in a self-reflective stance of re-evaluation of the past religious studies’ heritage. And this is the second reason for which I have very much welcomed this book.

The volume showcases the following excellent confrontations: Stewart Guthrie vs. Robert Horton, Jason Slone vs. Karl Marx (and Darwin), Harvey Whitehouse vs. Émile Durkheim, Ann Taves vs. Max Weber, Konrad Talmont-Kaminski vs. Bronisław Malinowski and F.B. Skinner, Joseph Bulbulia vs. Sigmund Freud, Gordon Ingram vs. Jean Piaget, Tanya Luhrmann vs. William James, Pascal Boyer vs. Claude Lévi-Strauss, Armin W. Geertz vs. Clifford Geertz and Edward Slingerland vs. the philosophical world of the Chinese *Analects*. Some of these chapters present outstanding achievements. In the wake of Martin and Pyysiäinen’s impressive and conclusive remarks, however, I have decided not to indulge in a self-adulatory synopsis of each chapter, but to under-

score the substantial room for historiographical improvement. Let us assume for the sake of brevity that there is more to learn from this book than I could possibly retell in a concise manner here, so let us move toward some clarifications that could enrich Martin and Pyysiäinen's epilogue.

Starting with the bibliography, the absence of Martin's article *Do Rituals Do?* (2008) from Boyer's superb account about Lévi-Strauss and cognition is remarkable, while the deliberate and unforeseen (though intriguing) attack to the idea of massive modularity is conducted by A.W. Geertz notwithstanding the disappointing absence of Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate* (2002) and H.C. Barrett and Robert Kurzban's (2006) clarifying contribution (cf. McCauley 2011, 50 ff.). Further, Luhrmann's problematic and quasi-metaphysical chapter (cf. 221) quotes the evolutionary concept of "spandrel" (158) without referring to the pivotal contribution of Stephen J. Gould and Richard Lewontin (1979).

Apart from these *addenda*, three specific points would need a more precise explanation.

First, the interesting approach offered by Bulbulia, who tries to turn some of the most promising Freudian statements about society and religion into testable hypotheses, is somehow tarnished by the fact that, as he writes, "Freud's theory is not explicitly grounded in biological theory" (125). Although this statement does not invalidate Bulbulia's insights, it is incorrect since Freud's theory is inextricably tied to the (fallacious) evolutionary trends widespread in those days: orthogenesis, recapitulation and neo-Lamarckism, without which Freud's theory cannot be properly understood. Moreover, one of the first articles published by Freud (1878) was devoted to the neuroanatomy of the lamprey *Petromyzon [Lampetra] planeri*. This subject was amply discussed in Frank J. Sulloway's research monograph entitled *Freud, Biologist of the Mind* (1979/1992) and scrutinized twice by S.J. Gould (1977/2003; 1987/2001).

Second, Ingram tries to salvage Piaget's developmental psychology in childhood cognition, but he fails to recognize that Piaget's neo-Lamarckian genetic epistemology, though still intellectually stimulating, has been scientifically discredited since the 1975 debate with Noam Chomsky and other scholars (Piattelli-Palmarini 1979; cf. McCauley 2011, 60 ff.).

Finally, Ingram states that creationism is a "quite anomalous...Protestant obsession" with regard to other world religions (133), which easily constitutes an outdated and improper assertion. An increasing number of academic accounts is available concerning the alarming rise of creationism and religious evolutionary accommodationism all over the world (e.g., Numbers 2006; Pievani 2007; Numbers 2009; Guessoum 2010; Sokal 2010, 297–321; Cartmill 2011; Blancke *et al.* 2013).

These notes should not mislead the readers, for *Mental Culture* is both an amazing disciplinary exercise in historiography and an indispensable addition to any serious cognitive bibliography. The book shows effectively that cognitive scientists (and scholars interested in CSR) should resist, willy-nilly, the inclination to salvage *in toto* those past social scientists which they grew fond of, because affection does not always equate scientific accuracy. Furthermore, an overzealous and apologetic humanistic approach can be detrimental for a sincere and straightforward move toward a consilient third culture (Snow 1959/1963; Brockman 1995; Slingerland and Collard 2012). For the first time ever, CSR “offers the most promising agenda for creating...a truly scientific study of religion” (226). Therefore, in order to avoid the inexcusable mistake of falling back to the solipsistic and chaotic realm of the past, sloppy historico-religious scholarship (where everybody’s ideal taxonomies can be simultaneously claimed to be right), CSR scholars must bear in mind that great (religious) thinkers might have often failed greatly (Gould 1987/2001). This naturally occurs because the scientific progress in neuroscience, cognition and evolution has made most of the past aprioristic assumptions useless. Hence, it is suitable to conclude with Darwin’s words from the last chapter of *The Descent of Man*: “False facts are highly injurious to the progress of science, for they often long endure; but false views, if supported by some evidence, do little harm, as every one takes a salutary pleasure in proving their falseness; and when this is done, one path towards error is closed and the road to truth is often at the same time opened” (1871, 385).

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